

Medi-Cal Must Cover Stair Lifts: S.F. Woman's Case Led to Court Order

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Wednesday, July 3, 2002

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San Francisco -- The plight of an 82-year-old San Francisco woman, confined to an upstairs bedroom for months by a disability and a state agency's resistance, has led an appellate court to order Medi-Cal to start paying for motorized stairway chair lifts. A three-judge state Court of Appeal panel ruled that lifts carrying chairs up flights of stairs are medical equipment that should be provided to needy patients. The court overturned a state regulation that barred Medi-Cal coverage.

"It makes no sense for the state to do this when the alternative is a nursing home that costs 10 times as much," said Stephen Ronfeldt, lawyer for Vera Blue, who challenged the regulation.

Blue, a retired schoolteacher's assistant, lives with her daughter in a two-story Potrero Hill home. Limited in her mobility by osteoarthritis, she fell and broke her collarbone while climbing the stairs to her bedroom in January 1997. Unable to manage the stairs on her own, she asked for a chair lift but was told Medi-Cal didn't cover it.

"My concern was, if there was a fire and she couldn't get down the stairs, my mother would die," Blue's daughter, Rhonda Cratchant, said Tuesday. "I work, my grandchildren were at school, and she could not get to a door."

After Blue spent several months in the bedroom, Cratchant said, the family came up with \$4,500 for a chair lift and continued to petition for state reimbursement. Medi-Cal agreed to pay for Blue's equipment after about a year but refused to cover anyone else, a settlement the mother and daughter rejected.

"I knew my mother couldn't be the first person who needed this, and we wanted it for everybody else," Cratchant said.

The state argued that a chair lift is not medical equipment because it does not cure a medical condition. But the appellate court, overturning a decision by San Francisco Superior Court Judge David Garcia in the state's favor, said medical equipment includes a device that "prevents significant disability," including the inability to move between floors.

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